

CADRE/PC 2005-021

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

THINK TANK AGENDA SETTING: THE INFLUENCE OF
THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS ON ELECTIONS,
THE NEW ADMINISTRATION'S TRANSITION AGENDA,
AND BEYOND

A CASE STUDY

by

Maria L. Carl, Major, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

May 2005

Distribution A: Approved for Public Release: Distribution Unlimited

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE MAY 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Think Tank Agenda Setting: The Influence of the Council on Foreign Relations on Elections, the New Administration's Transition Agenda, and Beyond. A Case Study				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air University, Air War College, 325 Chennault Circle, Maxwell AFB, AL, 36112				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 58	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense. In accordance with Air Force Instruction 51-303, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER	ii
PREFACE	iv
ABSTRACT	vi
I. MISSION OF THE COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS.....	1
Mission Statement	
History and Role of Think Tanks and CFR	
CFR and Bipartisanship	
II. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY.....	10
The Case Study	
Agenda-Setting Theory via Mass Media	
Power Elite Theory	
III. CFR AND THE 2003/2004 ELECTION/TRANSITION AGENDAS.....	23
Determining Issue Priorities	
Organizing Meetings, Events	
Communicating Messages and Disseminating Information	
IV. THE CFR AND THE NEWS MEDIA.....	27
V. MEASURING THE INFLUENCE OF THE CFR	35
VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	42
APPENDICES	
A - Council on Foreign Relations List of Publication Political Leanings.....	45
B - Think Tanks in Brief.....	48
C - The Revolving Door of Think Tanks and Public Service.....	48
D - Typology for Autonomous and Affiliated Public Policy Think Tanks.....	48
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49

Preface

While serving as an Air Force Fellow to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR, the Council) from 2004-2005, I also acted as the Council's de facto Communication Manager for the Washington D.C. office. Because I filled this role during a Presidential election year, the Council was in the full throes of analyzing the election agenda, and developing a prioritized policy agenda for the transition administration of Democratic challenger Senator John Kerry, or the second term administration of President George W. Bush. While the Council's mission is expressly stated as that of foreign policy, it is nonetheless active in providing expert speakers and thinkers on a variety of issues that span the domestic and foreign policy gamut. How that agenda and those events reaches the influential Council membership—as well as the targeted news media and members of Congress—is largely accomplished through the Council's communications office. It was from this vantage point, therefore, that I was able to observe and participate in not only the thought processes behind the agenda setting itself, but in the propagation of the results of those meetings. This paper is a case study of how think tanks in general, but the Council on Foreign Relations in particular, wields significant influence on the policy issues discussed in an election and in the transition agenda that follows. It is a study which tracks the 2003-2004 process of meetings and decisions made as to what the issues would be, how they would be prioritized, who would speak about them and to which audiences the issues would be presented both pre and post election. It looks at how this

snapshot of Council activity may be indicative of overall influence of think tanks on public policy agenda setting.

I offer the observations and conclusions in this case study from my role as a member of the Council's DC Meetings team and also as a member of the Council's Communications team. I'd like to thank the Director of the Washington Program, Nancy Roman, for her support of the fellowship and my inclusion in the meetings team and also the Vice President for Communications, Ms Lisa Shields, for her support of my role with the Council's communication efforts.

Abstract

The idea that think tanks set the order of importance of issues seems fairly obvious—they are comprised of academics, revolving door administration officials, and other minds devoted to the full-time research and analysis of the issues facing our government and our world. They have the luxury of exploring a variety of options related to an issue and the resources to dig deeply and vertically into an issue versus the broader paintbrush strokes that official government agency and departments generally provide. In many respects, think tank influence is like that of the U.S. news media. Much like the news media, think tanks can highlight what they consider newsworthy and that highlighted information then becomes, by definition, news. American voters tend to perceive the big issues of the day as those issues on which the media focus. There has been a great deal of research and suggestion that it is the news media that are setting the public agenda in the United States. But it is not as simple as that. For example, why do the media focus on certain issues and not others? Is it due to the news value, which underlies the decisions the media professionals make?

To what extent is the agenda set for the media? In some cases, organizations and individuals savvy to the business, play the media at their own game by taking advantage of news values—choosing to announce the details of an embarrassing report on the same day as another scheduled press announcement. This kind of activity is rampant in political campaign machines during election years in particular. In fact, the news media are generally exactly and only that—a medium for communicating the information of another source. To the extent an organization like the Council on Foreign Relations can influence the news media and the targeted government audience, the real source is often

the think tank. Obviously, various think tanks focus on various different issues and for various effects. But once a think tank is firmly established and respected, its influence is nearly infinite. The literature surrounding this area of study is substantial, and it should be noted that agenda-setting can occur on many different levels, at different stages of the campaign for different kinds of think tanks and simultaneously as a result of both public and political influences. The purpose of this case study is to outline the specific impact of the Council on Foreign Relations on the 2004 election issues agenda and subsequent transition/new administration agenda. I'll review the process by which the issues were determined by the Council, the subsequent setting of meetings and topics—and their respective experts and presiders, and the decisions to invite select news media, corporate membership and of course the very influential Council members themselves. I'll also assess these through the lens of agenda-setting and power elite theory. Finally, I'll identify a few of the measurement tools think tanks, like the Council, use to measure their influence and impact on a given subject and in general.

As the acting communication manager for the Council's Washington DC Program's communication efforts, I have had the opportunity to see not only the general influence, but also the deliberate marketing effects of this effort.

What application can this provide for the military? There are two significant applications. First, because the military leadership cannot actively lobby Congress for specific things—policy, acquisition, etc, we rely on legislative education and outside association efforts on our behalf.

We may be neglecting or not giving enough credence to the potentially powerful “third-party” advocate in think tanks. Second, in addition to think tanks working in an educational or advocacy role, they can also bridge the gap of forecasting future political-

military issues and offering valuable options to time-starved military leaders who do not have the luxury of vast and substantial research on a problem.

In an effort to demonstrate the influence process of a think tank in a relatively controlled and measurable time frame, this case study is targeted at the specific agenda setting and issue-setting process by the Council on Foreign Relations during the 2004 Presidential election and subsequent transition term.

Chapter 1

The Mission of the Council on Foreign Relations

“Of the many influences on U.S. foreign policy formulation, the role of think tanks is among the most important and least appreciated.”

—Richard Haass, President, Council on Foreign Relations

The Council on Foreign Relations, one of the oldest public policy institutions in the United States, was originally founded in 1921 by businessmen, bankers, and lawyers determined to keep the U.S. engaged in the world. This followed in the wake of World War I when many U.S. policy voices were promoting a more insular view of American policy.¹ Its stated mission is to be an independent national membership organization and a nonpartisan center for scholars dedicated to producing and disseminating ideas so that members, students, interested citizens, and government officials in the United States and other countries can better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other governments.

Two things are significant about the mission statement: that it seeks to provide information for decision making, and that it adopts an independent and nonpartisan position.

The first aspect is characteristic of think tanks in general. According to Donald Abelson, professor of political science at the University of Western Ontario,

U.S. think tanks are distinguished from their counterparts in other countries by their ability to participate directly and indirectly in policy-making and by the willingness of policy-makers to turn to them for policy advice. Scholars who have studied the growth and development of American think tanks generally agree that the highly decentralized nature of the American political system, combined with the lack of strict party discipline and the large infusion of funds from philanthropic foundations, have contributed greatly to the proliferation of think tanks in the past quarter-century.²

Essentially, all think tanks are dedicated to disseminating their research and recommendations to policy-makers, to the news media, influential opinion leaders, interested organizations, and members of the public.³

The term “think tank” was employed originally in the U.S. during World War II to refer to a secure room or environment where defense scientists and military planners could meet to discuss strategy; now the term is used to describe over 2,000 U.S.-based organizations that engage in policy analysis.⁴

It is necessary to recognize that, while think tanks share a common desire to shape public opinion and the policy preferences and choices of decision-makers, how they seek to exercise policy influence depends on their mandate, resources and priorities.⁵

Richard Haass, the President of the Council on Foreign Relations, elaborates further,

“A distinctly American phenomenon, independent policy research institutions have shaped U.S. global engagement for nearly 100 years. They affect American foreign policy-makers in five distinct ways: by generating original ideas and options for policy, by supplying a ready pool of experts for employment in government, by offering venues for high-level discussion, by educating U.S. citizens about the world, and by supplementing official efforts to mediate and resolve conflict.”⁶

“Think tanks are independent institutions organized to conduct research and produce independent, policy-relevant knowledge. They fill a critical void between the academic world, on the one hand, and the realm of government, on the other,” said Haass.

Haass goes on to say that, within universities, research is frequently driven by arcane theoretical and methodological debates only distantly related to real policy dilemmas.

Within government, meanwhile, officials immersed in the concrete demands of day-to-day policy-making are often too busy to take a step back and reconsider the broader trajectory of U.S. policy. Think tanks’ primary contribution, therefore, is to help bridge this gap between the world of ideas and action.⁷ This is an important aspect of how think tanks in general, can be particularly helpful to military decision makers.

From an historical point of view, there are essentially three waves of think tank development in America. The first wave grew out of philanthropists seeking to ensure America stayed in the post-World War I global game.

The second wave emerged from America’s post-World War II superpower status and some, like Rand, even received government support.

The third wave, which commenced in the 1970s, is more advocacy-based and focuses as much on influence as on research, whereby they are working to compete in a marketplace of ideas—like the Heritage Foundation.⁸

Haass further contends that think tanks, like the Council on Foreign Relations, can engage the greater public even as they convene elites by educating U.S. citizens about the nature of the world in which they live. They can also bridge differences in a larger international context by assuming a more active foreign policy role, sponsoring sensitive dialogues and providing third-party mediation for parties in conflict.⁹

In this increasingly complex, interdependent and information-rich world, governments and individual policy-makers face the common problem of bringing expert knowledge to bear in governmental decision-making. Policy makers need basic information about the world and the societies they govern as to how current policies are working, possible policy alternatives, and their likely costs and consequences.¹⁰

Strobe Talbott, the head of The Brookings Institute, echoed this need, “A few years ago, it was realized that policy makers and their staffs don’t always have time to read books and lengthy reports.”¹¹

As aforementioned in the first chapter, the Council’s mission explicitly states its non-partisan position. While this is a characteristic of the first wave of think tanks in the U.S., it is certainly not the case with the latter waves whose purpose is expressly that of advocacy.

Among think tanks, the non-partisan Council on Foreign Relations has been the most adept at convening experts, hosting hundreds of meetings annually in New York, Washington and major cities around the country.

In the October, 2004 issue of the Council’s newsletter, *Calendar and Chronicle*, an article outlined the bi-partisan membership survey response as to their perceptions of the Council’s nonpartisanship. A full ninety-eight percent of members surveyed viewed the Council favorably in this regard.¹² Specifically, the surveyed members cited the Council as a high-quality organization that delivers real value to the foreign policy debate with a stellar reputation, non-partisan identity, elite membership, convening power, and an overall perception that the Council as a trusted source of information and analysis on foreign policy.¹³

Nancy Roman, the Council's Washington Program director, has made non-partisanship one of her priorities.

Extreme partisanship can make it difficult for this country to act consistently in the world. It can waste the limited time of government officials and discourage able men and women from even entering public service in the first place. The Council is in a unique position to do something about this problem. This is what lies behind the launching of a new Council initiative on fostering bipartisanship in American foreign policy.¹⁴

Among the steps outlined in this initiative include regular meetings between the Council and congressional staffs, focused discussion over invitation-only dinners, and a report authored by Ms Roman herself detailing what can be done to improve day-to-day relations between the parties in Washington.

According to Ms Roman, this initiative is actually in accordance with the Council's historical mission,

The Council is not a trade organization nor has it any connection with a political party. We boast more than 4,200 members: some Democrats, some Republicans and some Independents. We may also include members who belong one or another smaller party. Such a mix is one dimension of the Council's larger commitment to diversity and balance, and our Meetings Program makes a concerted effort to ensure that its hundreds of annual offerings reflect political balance and a diversity of perspective.¹⁵

The intellectual output of the Council similarly reflects a wide range of view and there is no litmus test for the nearly 50 full and part-time fellows in the Studies program. Articles in the Council's journal, *Foreign Affairs*, run the political gamut.

Additionally, there is no "Council position" per se on any issue. One vehicle for introducing a diversity of ideas on a given issue is the task force. The Council has

sponsored over 50 Independent Task Forces in the last decade alone and generally seeks to name a prominent Republican and Democrat to co-chair them.¹⁶ Roman says,

This commitment to avoid partisanship is a priority for this organization. It is also one of our distinct advantages. We live in a time when many other institutions are judged to be partisan, making it all too easy for those who disagree with them to dismiss their work. The Council is one of the few places that people recognize has no collective institutional bias. This commitment to avoid bias will remain the case. Our goal is to be a value resource to the executive branch, congress, corporations, educators and students, journalist, NGOs and American society at large.¹⁷

For U.S. officials, events at major think tanks offer non-partisan settings to announce new initiatives, explain current policy, and launch trial balloons. For visiting foreign dignitaries, the opportunity to appear before prominent think tank audiences provides access to the most influential segments of the U.S. foreign policy establishment.¹⁸

“The challenge facing all think tanks is how to achieve and sustain their independence so they can speak “truth to power.”¹⁹

Additionally, maintaining a non-partisan/bi-partisan approach enables think tanks to provide options and advice based on pure academic-based findings.

Kent Weaver, a Brookings scholar, calls think tanks “universities without students.”²⁰ Think tanks, like the Carnegie Endowment and Brookings, assign the highest priority to producing quality academic research, publishing books, journals and other material that is intended for different target audiences.²¹ Abelson concurs,

Although scholars from these institutions occasionally provided advice to policy-makers when they were first established, their primary goal was not to directly influence policy decisions, but to help education and inform policy makers and the public about the potential consequences of pursuing a range of foreign policy options. In part, the

willingness of policy research-oriented think tanks to remain detached from the political process stemmed from their commitment to preserving their intellectual and institutional independence, something many contemporary think tanks have been prepared to sacrifice.²²

John A. Howard, President of the Rockford Howard Center, concurs,

“It is especially important in the cultural arena that a think tank not develop a reputation as a chronic complainer, dwelling on the bad things the opposition is doing. The think tank’s influence will be far greater if it is saying, ‘here is a good thing that should be accomplished, this is why it is important, here is one way to do it, and look at the wonderful results.’”²³

The greater public, receiving information from think tanks primarily through the news media, are also becoming savvier about the source’s leanings.

“News consumers want think tank ‘experts’ properly identified,” said Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, ombudsman for National Public Radio, “they are becoming increasingly resistant to the notion that experts are truly neutral or value-free.”²⁴

Notes

¹ Betancourt, Amy Coughenour. A National Dialogue on Establishing a Think Tank: The Case of Honduras (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 36.

² Abelson, Donald E. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical View (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 73.

³ Talbott, Strobe. The Brookings Institution: How a Think Tank Works (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 20.

⁴ Ibid., Abelson, Donald E., 73.

⁵ Ibid., Abelson, Donald E., 73.

⁶ Haass, Richard. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker’s Perspective (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 5.

⁷ Ibid, Haass, Richard, 6.

⁸ Ibid, Haass, Richard, 6.

⁹ Ibid, Haass, Richard, 8.

Notes

¹⁰ McGann, James G. Think Tanks and the Transnationalization of Foreign Policy (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 13.

¹¹ Ibid., Talbott, Strobe., 21.

¹² *Calendar and Chronicle*, October 2004, 1.

¹³ Ibid., *Calendar and Chronicle*, 1.

¹⁴ Roman, Nancy.

¹⁵ Ibid., Roman, Nancy.

¹⁶ Ibid., Roman, Nancy.

¹⁷ Ibid., Roman, Nancy.

¹⁸ Ibid., Haass, Richard, 21.

¹⁹ Ibid., McGann, James G., 14.

²⁰ Abelson, Donald E. *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University, 2002.

²¹ Abelson, Donald E. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical View (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 73.

²² Ibid., Abelson, Donald E., 73.

²³ Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin. Media-savvy think tanks provide influence. (*Rockford Register Star*, Rockford, IL, July 18, 2004.)

²⁴ Ibid, Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, 2.

Chapter 2

Theory and Methodology

The methodology for this project is the case study. As such, this project examines the process of how the Council on Foreign Relations sought to educate and influence the agenda for the 2004 Presidential elections and subsequent transition agenda as a means of studying overall influence. Additionally, the influence of think tanks in general and the Council on Foreign Relations in particular, will be viewed through the theoretical framework of Agenda-setting theory and Elite Theory.

Social scientists M. E. McCombs and D. L. Shaw, in Agenda Setting and the Public Agenda, state that the agenda-setting function of the mass media, including the sources for the mass media, is not so much about telling people what to think, but what to think *about*.¹

Further, they contend that, while the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the *salience* of attitudes toward the political issues.²

This notion of influencing the greater public—and policy makers—with issue salience, is central to the role of influence of think tanks, and directly related to the stated mission of the Council. The routine “peddling” of Council experts to discuss various

foreign policy issues with public gatherings and through media outreach is geared specifically to this end.

In particular, it is noteworthy that the various meetings, roundtables and seminars are not usually confined to a specific foreign policy issue or problem. Instead, the topic of the meetings is more open-ended, such as “The Middle East post-Saddam,” for example. This allows the Council to bring in more than one expert to address various issues in a region: political, health, technology and so on. It also allows them the opportunity then, to go more in depth on the myriad of issues, alternatives and recommendations about those issues or problems.

In short, it enables think tanks to provide issue salience—as McCombs and Shaw said, “not what to think, but what to think about.”

Framing and Creating Issue-Salience

Rather than seeing the media as telling the viewer what to think, television presentations can be seen as “setting agenda” in terms of how and which issues should be discussed. We take the term setting the agenda to mean the way in which television presentations frame the vents in such a way as to promote particular accounts as being the most legitimate and valid, while other accounts are excluded and marginalized. By doing so, the parameters within which the debate can be conducted are set out: a campaign message during an election does not simply tell us how to vote.

It also implicitly assumes the legitimacy of a certain type of political system. So, the media can be seen as having the power to frame the debate by promoting the legitimacy of certain presentations and accounts...viewers are active but within the parameters set by the text.

McCombs and Shaw ³ echo this idea that the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. That is, that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign more by influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues already laid out on the table.

Cleve Mesidor, ⁴ in his paper “Agenda-Setting: The CNN Effect, and its impact on US International Policy,” cites Bernard Cohen regarding this notion, “the news may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers/viewers what to think about.”⁵

McCombs and Shaw ⁶ go a step further arguing,

“...the consequences of agenda-setting and media framing suggest that media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think.”⁷

Composite Agenda-Setting

Moreover, the major networks—and the reporting media in general—will often bounce off of one another in the formulation of these frameworks thereby creating an almost common composite framework for the election before it has even begun! A cursory review of the major network evening news broadcasts will show almost all of the same sound bites pulled from the primary debates on a given date tied to the overall issue framework already established by both the campaigns and the media. Mesidor ⁸ agrees,

“Network television presents a fairly homogenous view of the campaign and non-campaign issues.”⁹

McCombs & Shaw ¹⁰ observed the phenomenon of “composite” news coverage in other primaries as well,

“...though the presidential candidates placed widely different emphasis upon different issues, the judgments of the voters seem to reflect the composite of the mass media coverage.”

Media provide compelling descriptions of a public world that people cannot directly experience and, by ignoring some problems and attending to others, television news programs profoundly affect which problems viewers take seriously. This is so especially among the politically naïve, who seem unable to challenge the pictures and narrations that appear on their television sets.

That media are instrumental in agenda-setting—particularly in the coverage of political events such as campaign primaries is a given. That think tanks experts help to feed the media, frame issues and analyze political events is also a given. As McCombs & Shaw ¹¹ said,

“Media matter. No one questions that the phenomenon of media agenda-setting—once an hypothesis—now is a demonstrated empirical reality. Nowhere is the agenda-setting influence of media more clearly or consistently shown than in the research on political campaigns. Studies indicate that news coverage of elections often influences what the public and the candidates themselves come to view as the important issues of the campaign.”¹²

Moreover, it seems likely that on issues about which the public may know little—be they specific issues like campaign finance reform, tax policy, health care, or even personal knowledge about the candidates themselves—the public will turn to the

broadcast media for their information. In fact, without the benefit of direct campaign contact, citizens *must* rely on the media for nearly all their elections information. Indeed, the media are now without question the basis for the candidates' organizations.¹³

As a result, if voters highly interested and highly uncertain about which party or candidate to support are more susceptible to media news emphasis, this places a great responsibility on reporters not just to report certain politically-related events and issues as fairly as possible, but also to choose which events and issues to cover with just as much fairness.

Ted Koppel, of Nightline ABC said,

“We like to say we cover the news, but in fact we create the reality.”¹⁴

Certainly, it would appear that there is little question of media agenda-setting in political primaries; the question is really so much whether it exists (it does) but to what degree it occurs, to the extent that the issue salience is truly embedded in voters' and policy maker's minds and also to the extent to which the candidates themselves play to what they perceive to be both the media's and the public's agenda.

In fact, if the media is the primary conduit to reach the public in these primaries, it is incumbent upon the mega-media directors and staffs for each candidate—as well as the think tanks-- to package an “agenda” that is most palpable to broadcast constraints (sound bites) as well as any perceived existing issue frameworks the media as a whole seem to portray. In this way, the agenda-setting game goes both ways, with the issues often diluted to a common middle ground both for candidates and for the media-candidate mix.

Another theory that is useful for the purpose of this case study is that of Elite Theory¹⁵ which essentially purports that the political system is dominated by a select

group of individuals and organizations with common goals--to include capitalism and a moderate level of government regulation driven by self-interest versus principle.

The notion is that the "top positions" in our country encompass the posts with the authority to run programs and activities of major political, economic, legal, educational, cultural, scientific, and civic institutions. Elite theorists, like Thomas Dye, contend that, "the occupants of these offices control half of the nation's industrial, communications, transportation, and banking assets, and two-thirds of all insurance assets. In addition, this elite group directs about 40 percent of the resources of private foundations and 50 percent of university endowments. Furthermore, less than 250 people hold the most influential posts in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government, while approximately 200 men and women run the three major television networks and most of the national newspaper chains."¹⁶

Certainly, the composition of the Council on Foreign Relations' 4,000+ membership—the result of a very rigorous nomination and selection process—reads like a "who's who" in American business, academia, media and government. Indeed, the fact that the Council is a membership organization first and foremost, separates it from other think tanks in this sense. It is not only the organization's fellows and experts who are influential, but also the membership itself. A review of the Council's membership roster includes, for example, the current Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, dozens of retired and active duty flag officers, and many field grade officers in key positions throughout the military today.

The power elite theory, in short, claims that single elite, not a multiplicity of competing groups, decides the life-and-death issues for the nation as a whole, leaving relatively minor matters for the middle level and almost nothing for the common person.

According to C. Wright Mills,¹⁷ a social scientist among the best known power-elite theorists, the governing elite in the United States draws its members from three areas: (1) the highest political leaders including the president and a handful of key cabinet members and close advisers; (2) major corporate owners and directors; and (3) high-ranking military officers.

Though the notion of such a powerful elite can risk sounding sinister, despite the fact these individuals constitute a close-knit group, elite theorists do not suggest that they are part of a conspiracy that secretly manipulates events in their own selfish interest.

Mills writes,

For the most part, the elite respects civil liberties, follows established constitutional principles, and operates openly and peacefully. It is not a dictatorship; it does not rely on terror, a secret police, or midnight arrests to get its way. It doesn't have to. Nor is its membership closed, although many members have enjoyed a head start in life by virtue of their being born into prominent families. Nevertheless, those who work hard, enjoy good luck, and demonstrate a willingness to adopt elite values do find it possible to work into higher circles from below¹⁸

Mills goes on to say the elite occupy the top "command posts" of society. These positions give their holders enormous authority over not just governmental, but financial, educational, social, civic, and cultural institutions as well. A small group is able to take fundamental actions that touch everyone.¹⁹

Decisions made in the boardrooms of large corporations and banks affect the rates of inflation and employment. The influence of the chief executive officers of the IBM and DuPont corporations often rivals that of the secretary of commerce. In addition, the needs of industry greatly

determine the priorities and policies of educational and research organizations, not to mention the chief economic agencies of government.²⁰

The power of the elite has also been enhanced by the close collaboration of political, industrial, and military organizations. As Washington has been called upon to play a more active role in domestic life, government has come to depend on the corporate world to carry out many of its activities.

Conversely, industry now relies heavily on federal supports, subsidies, protection, and loans to ensure the success of its ventures. Although business people and politicians constantly carp at each other, the fact remains that they have grown so close; they prosper together far more than they do separately.²¹

Mills argues that, at the same time business and government were growing close, the Cold War also elevated the prestige and power of the military establishment. Far from the days of citizen-soldiers, the present class of professional warriors has an impact that far transcends mere military affairs. The demands of foreign affairs, the dangers of potential adversaries, the sophistication and mystique of new weapons, and especially the development of the means of mass destruction have all given power and prestige to our highest military leaders.²²

In sum, Mills concludes that,

As a group, then, this ruling triumvirate of politicians, corporate executives, and military officers has, by virtue of the positions they hold, unprecedented authority to make decisions of national and international consequence. But the mere occupancy of these command posts does not fully explain the effectiveness of their power. Of equal significance is their common outlook on life and their

ability and willingness to act harmoniously on basic issues.²³

Aside from the theory's claim that this ruling elite share a kind of unity of thought, there are two other important aspects of elite theory for the purpose of this case study. The first is the idea that the members of this elite cannot shed their common heritage when revolving between think tanks, private industry and public service; the second is elite theory's notion of the public's role and of public opinion.

Mills²⁴ argues that, by the time men and women reach the top of the corporate or professional ladder, their common experiences have given them a shared way of looking at economics and politics so that they experience and react to events in the same ways,

When they enter public service these people cannot shed their heritage. The interesting point is how impossible it is for such [political appointees] to divest themselves of their engagement with the corporate world in general and with their own corporations in particular. Not only their money, but their friends, their interests, their training--their lives in short--are deeply involved in this world...The point is not so much financial or personal interests in a given corporation, but identification with the corporate world. To ask a man suddenly to divest himself of these interests and sensibilities is almost like asking a man to become a woman²⁵

From a communications standpoint—and indeed, a political and democratic standpoint—the most disturbing premise of elite theory deals with the demise of the public as an independent force in civic affairs. Mills writes,

Instead of initiating policy, or even controlling those who govern them, men and women in America have become passive spectators, cheering the heroes and booing the villains, but taking little or no direct part in the action. Citizens have become increasingly alienated and estranged from politics as can be seen in the sharp decline in electoral participation over the last several decades. As a result, the

control of their destinies has fallen into the lap of the power elite.²⁶

According to Mills and his supporters, herein lies a supreme irony of American politics. He writes,

Foreign policy is a trunk. From it grow a host of decisions with far-reaching political, economic, social and moral implications. Since foreign relations affect everyone every day in every way, how can a country be democratic if it takes these matters out of the hands of its citizens? How can people be free unless they discuss and debate the things that affect them the most? Elite theory tells us why this silence has lasted for so long: The power elite establish the basic policy agenda in such areas as national security and economics. Of course, since it only sets the general guidelines, the middle level has plenty to do implementing them, but the public has been virtually locked out. Its main activities--wearing campaign buttons, expressing opinions to pollsters, voting every two or four years--are mostly symbolic. The people do not directly affect the direction of fundamental policies.²⁷

Many scholars use elite theory to identify the close ties between those who fund think tanks and the individuals who operate them.”²⁸ In essence, the assumption is that, with the right connection, think tanks can and will be able to influence public theory.

However, Donald Abelson ²⁹argues that to understand the influence of think tanks on policy, one must adopt an “institutionalist approach” because think tanks not only vary enormously in terms of the resources they have at their disposal, but they assign different priorities to participating in various stages of the policy cycle. This is particularly apparent when comparing how think tanks function in different political systems.

Think tanks may often be unable to influence the final choice made by policymakers, but they can do much to set—and perhaps expand—the limits of

respectable debate. This, in turn, leads to the consideration of various alternatives that may not have been on the agenda previously.

In sum, while there has been a great deal of speculation in applying the power elite theory to think tanks—and particularly to the Council on Foreign Relations, it is not entirely clear that the results of the Council's efforts validate that claim.

Moreover, when combined with the agenda-setting theory notion that a source (like the Council) is setting issue salience versus specific issue recommendation, the harsher edges of elite theory are softened. These theories are important, however, when we analyze influence and determine the communication process of an organization like the Council on Foreign Relations.

Notes

¹ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1991). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. In Protest, David L. and Maxwell McCombs (Eds.), Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 18.

² Ibid., McCombs and Shaw, 18.

³ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. Journal of Communication, 43(2). 58.

⁴ Mesidor, Cleve. (2000). Agenda-Setting: The CNN Effect and its Impact on US International Policy. Paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

⁵ Ibid., Mesidor, Cleve. (2000).

⁶ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. Journal of Communication, 43(2), 64.

⁷ Ibid., McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L. (1993), 65.

Notes

⁸ Ibid, Mesidor, Cleve.

⁹ Ibid., Mesidor, Cleve.

¹⁰ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1993), 64.

¹¹ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1991). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. In Protes, David L. and Maxwell McCombs (Eds.), Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking (p 17). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

¹² Ibid., McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L., 149.

¹³ Ibid., McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L., 150.

¹⁴ Golden, James L., Berquist, Goodwin F. & Coleman, William E. (1996). The Rhetoric of Western Thought, 6th ed. City: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.

¹⁵ Reynolds, H.T.

¹⁶ Ibid, Reynolds, H.T.

¹⁷ Mills, C. Wright.

¹⁸ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

¹⁹ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁰ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²¹ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²² Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²³ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁴ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁵ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁶ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁷ Ibid., Mills, C. Wright

²⁸ Steelman, Aaron. Book Review: Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes by Donald E. Abelson, (*Cato Journal*, 2002), 163.

²⁹ Ibid., Steelman, Aaron, 163

Chapter 3

CFR and Presidential Elections and Transition

“Presidential campaigns and transitions are ideal occasions to set the foreign policy agenda.”

—Martin Anderson, Hoover Institution

During a Presidential Election, and the subsequent transition—either to a new administration or second term of an existing administration--presidential candidates solicit the advice of a vast number of intellectuals in order to establish policy positions on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues. Presidential candidates exchange ideas with policy experts and test them out on the campaign trail.¹

“It’s like a national test-marketing strategy,” said Anderson. The most celebrated case occurred after the 1980 election, when the Reagan Administration adopted the Heritage Foundation’s publication, *Mandate for Change*, as a blueprint for governing.

Richard Haass cited another instance where, in 1992, a report by IIT and the Carnegie Endowment proposed an ‘economic security council.’ The incoming Clinton Administration implemented this proposal in the creation of the National Economic Council which continues to this day.²

James G. McGann, Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy Research Institute, elaborates,

In politics, information no longer translates into power unless it is in the right form at the right time. Governments and policy-makers are often moved to seize the moment because the right social and political forces are in alignment or because a crisis compels them to take action. In either case, they often move quickly and make decisions based on available information, which does not always lead to the most informed policy. In short, policy-makers and others interested in the policy-making process, required information that is timely, understandable, reliable, accessible, and useful.³

Between July of 2004 and the November 3, 2004 elections, the Council on Foreign Relations sponsored over 200 meetings, roundtables and seminars with the heading of “Election’04” or “Transition’04” at its New York, Washington, Boston and other national locations.

At the Washington Program office, the meetings team convened to brainstorm what the prioritized list of issue items ought to be for either the new transition administration or for that of President Bush’s second term. This brainstorming list, in turn, was finessed into specific categories and meshed with that of the NY office’s efforts to result in an overall internal Council list. It was from this list that the related meetings, roundtables and seminars would be built, the speakers solicited and the presiders asked to preside.

The participants include the Council’s senior fellows, its resident experts, its graduate student-level staff and submissions from the Council membership at large

Notes

¹ Haass, Richard. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker’s Perspective (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 7.

² Ibid., Haass, Richard, 7.

Notes

³ McGann, James G. Think Tanks and the Transnationalization of Foreign Policy (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 14.

Chapter 4

CFR and the News Media

“Think Tanks have made themselves increasingly indispensable by being media-savvy.”

—Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, ombudsman, National Public Radio

Policy makers are often influenced by public opinion, and public opinion is often influenced by coverage in the news media. Additionally, much of what policy-makers, their advisers, and the public know about policy issues they learn through the news media.¹

Therefore, it’s not surprising that many scholars at think tanks devote a good deal of effort to presenting their ideas and findings through the news media. This takes the form of interviews on television and radio and in print, opinion articles for the op-ed pages of newspapers, press briefings, public speeches, and articles for scholarly journals.²

Brookings Institute even built its own TV and radio studio to facilitate media interviews and the Council on Foreign Relations procured special studio-quality radio taping capability for the same purpose.

Gaining access to the media is only one of the many strategies think tanks rely on to shape public opinion and public policy.³

“Just how successful think tanks are varies, but the influence is there,” said Norman Solomon, a nationally syndicated columnist on media and politics. A handful of the

largest think tanks have had major effects on public attitudes, legislation and presidential policies,” said Solomon.⁴

“American news organizations have gone through extraordinary downsizing through the 1990s,” said Jeffrey A. Dvorkin, ombudsman for National Public Radio, “Think Tanks have understood that they are less well-resourced than they used to be, so available (and free) op-ed pieces, interview and resources for journalists have raised the profile of think tanks in American journalism.”⁵

“Think Tanks have made themselves increasingly indispensable by being media-savvy, said Dvorkin.”⁶ “They do it by supplying particular spokespeople who are more accessible than man academic-types, who used to be more frequently sought after by journalists.”⁷

Besides providing ready-made op-eds for newspapers and experts to appear on television and radio, some think tanks are taking the media by the hand in other ways like “data-journalism.”

“All Washington think tanks are in the business of supplying journalists—as well as legislators and other decision-makers—with their take on policies an issues, most often in the form of briefings, papers or books. But Heritage is taking this relationship to a new level by providing reporters with raw data and showing them how to analyze it, essentially offering to serve as a newsroom’s own research department.”⁸

According to Deane, the Heritage Foundation Data Analysis Center can point to stories in the Detroit Free Press, Investor’s business Daily, Cox Newspapers and the Scripps Howard News Service among others.⁹

One role of a free press in a democratic society is ostensibly to provide the public with the information necessary for them to take part in governing themselves. Therefore, the questions of how a media organization decides what stories are important and how to cover them becomes a matter of great importance in our society. In political contests, this takes on an even more dramatic role.

“The televised presidential debates are a high-profile media influence, and as such can be considered a valid stimulus for research to examine political attitudes.”¹⁰ Carlin & McKinney¹¹ assert that, in many ways, the debates constitute the ultimate job interview for candidates and the public. Because the debates are scrutinized as such, the information learned from viewing debates, may be the best determinant for how a voter will or will not vote and therefore, amplifies the impact of the television coverage all the more.¹²

What are contributing factors to media agenda-setting in the primaries and final debates in an election year? Resources of time, staff and money top the list. At both local and national levels, journalists complain about a lack of resources. That being the case, there inevitably will be a focus on only a few candidates. Where television is concerned, air time itself is a scarce resource. The ratings have to be kept high to keep the advertisers happy, so a televised debate is likely to be personalized as a fairly brief encounter between two political personalities rather as a wide-ranging discussion of major political issues.

Sometimes, the framing will be an exercise in technical prowess—only focusing cameras on the “front runner” candidates. Or, it may be a matter of who gets the sound

bites or the most sound bites in a given broadcast. Finally, it may be the correspondent's voice-over context that lends gravity and persuasion to a given candidate(s) remarks.

Political Communications theorist Julia Spiker¹³ asserts that the reason framing is potentially important to understanding the agenda-setting process is that often the media communicate issues relevant to a campaign, but fail to give an implicit campaign frame. The result is that the audience must decide if issues are relevant or irrelevant to the campaign. If the media provide a campaign frame, then the consumer knows the linkage to the candidates or electoral process. If the media do not provide a campaign frame, then the audience is left ambiguities as to the campaign relevance of the story.¹⁴

The agenda-setting impact of television, relative to the daily newspaper, also supports many earlier studies. For example, McCombs found newspapers to be most influential early in the campaign process. However, television 'catches up' as Election Day approaches. Therefore, television news can have impact on political agendas late in a campaign, especially when framing is included as a message variable.¹⁵

Larry Powell and Joseph Cowart¹⁶ assert that,

"... the press rarely pass along the entire speech to its news audience, opting instead for quick summaries which include a limited number of quotes."¹⁷ Moreover, that broadcast news uses even less—focusing in on the five, ten second sound bite which can become the cornerstone by which the candidate is remembered and identified both press and public.¹⁸

In the media's defense, however, limited resources restrict them from covering every possible candidate and every possible issue in entirety. Media are forced to prioritize and select what will be used.

Powell and Cowart ¹⁹ raise the idea of message framing whereby the media will be more likely to embrace the candidate(s) who frame the issue in a way that is acceptable to them. So what is “acceptable?”

Leroy Sievers, the senior producer for political campaign coverage at ABC’s *Nightline*, says “when I am reviewing the footage of a primary debate for the clips I’ll use, I look first of all, for the winning sound bite—the phrase or gestured exchange which speaks visually, with emotion and perhaps a bit of drama. After that, I am looking for themes—themes we’ve seen not just in this primary, but perhaps contradictions to issues from the candidate’s earlier speeches as well.” ²⁰

Further, Sievers said he is looking for experts—experts on the political process, on the issues at hand and on the candidates themselves to do the post-debate analysis. While some networks have a paid expert on retainer, the majority of the experts are also think tank experts. The Communication Department of the Council actively seeks out network booking producers to ensure their experts are prominently included in the rolodex for experts. Additionally, any google search on a subject will often yield a link to the Council’s homepage where the resident experts’ bios and areas of expertise are provided for the producer, as well as all the contact information.

Television at the network news level, demands that the images be as interesting as possible in as little time as possible. The goal is to get the gist of the substantive issues onto tape so that the news correspondent can frame it within the context of the overall campaign. If a candidate’s primary speech can offer that, he or she is more likely to get the coverage—and thereby convey the messages he desires.

McCombs ²¹ distinguishes what he calls three “logics” which compete for superiority in a campaign: public logic, local media logic and national media logic.

The public logic differs from the media logic in that the public is concerned to answer the question “who will govern best?” and the media are concerned to answer the question “who will win?”

This journalism concentration on the “who will win” question derives from the fact that it is difficult to create an unambiguous story out of political issues which necessarily have many shades of gray.

By personalizing—by reducing the presidential primers to a fight between a couple of heavyweight contenders, the media helps to foster such unambiguousness. This emphasis on the “who will win” question also leads to the so-called “horserace journalism” phenomenon. ²²

Being able to consult an “expert” also assists the media in helping to draw conclusions and point their viewers in a certain direction

Notes

¹ Talbott, Strobe. The Brookings Institution: How a Think Tank Works (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 21.

² Ibid., Talbott, Strobe, 21.

³ Abelson, Donald E. *American Think-Tanks and their Role in US Foreign Policy*. New York: St Martins, 1996, 134.

⁴ Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin. Media-savvy think tanks provide influence. (*Rockford Register Star*, Rockford, IL, July 18, 2004.)

⁵ Ibid., Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin.

⁶ Ibid, Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin.

⁷ Ibid, Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin.

⁸ Deane, Claudia. Computer-Assisted Influence? (*Washington Post*, Washington D.C., April 19,2002.)

⁹ Ibid., Deane, Claudia.

¹⁰ Spiker, Julia. Analyzing Political Malaise: Communicating Politics through

Notes

Debates and Focus Groups. Paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Carlin, D.B., & McKinney, M. S. (Eds.). (1994). The 1992 presidential debates in focus. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

¹² Ibid., Spiker, Julia.

¹³ Ibid., Spiker, Julia.

¹⁴ Ibid., Spiker, Julia.

¹⁵ McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1991). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. In Protesse, David L. and Maxwell McCombs (Eds.), Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking (p 17). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 163.

¹⁶ Powell, Larry and Joseph Cowart. Political Rhetoric and their Speeches. Position paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Ibid., Powell, Larry and Joseph Cowart.

¹⁸ Ibid., Powell, Larry and Joseph Cowart.

¹⁹ Ibid., Powell, Larry and Joseph Cowart.

²⁰ Sievers, Leroy (2000). *Nightline*. "Personal Communication," 4 Aug 00.

²¹ Ibid., McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1991), 17.

²² Ibid., McCombs, M.E. and Shaw, D.L., 17.

Chapter 5

Measuring the Influence of Think Tanks

What makes think tanks in the U.S. unique, besides their number, is the extent to which many have become actively involved in the policy-making process. It is the ability of American think tanks to participate both directly and indirectly in policy-making and the willingness of policy-makers to turn to them for policy advice that leads some scholars to conclude that US think tanks have the greatest impact on shaping public policy.¹

But few scholars have examined closely how that policy influence is achieved. Among the obstacles that must be overcome to measure the influence of think tanks, it is important to recognize that think tanks exercise different types of policy influence at different stages of the policy-making cycle.

“Think tanks are in the business of developing and promoting ideas, and like corporations in the private sector, they devote considerable resources to marketing their product. Unlike corporations, however, think tanks measure success not by profit margins, but by how much influence they have in shaping public opinion and policy. In this sense, think tanks have come to resemble interest or pressure groups that compete among other non-governmental organizations for political power and prestige.”²

Publicly, think tanks rely on many strategies to convey their views to policy-makers and the public such as holding public conferences and seminar to discuss various issues, encouraging resident scholar to give lectures, testifying before legislative committees, enhancing their exposure in the media, disseminating their research and crating web pages on the Internet. Privately, experts may seek to become involved in foreign policy by accepting cabinet, sub-cabinet or other positions in the federal government serving as adviser during presidential elections, on transition teams and on presidential and congressional advisory boards.³

“One of the most popular ways of determining the relative influence of think tanks is to look at the amount of media citations they garner.”⁴

“Think tanks remain a principal source of information and expertise for policy makers and journalists” said Andrew Rich,⁵ “Their studies and reports are regularly relied upon to guide and/or bolster members of Congress in their legislative efforts and journalists in their reporting.”⁶ Rich found that more than 90% (of the Member of the House of Representatives and the Senate) viewed think tanks as somewhat or very influential in contemporary American politics.”⁷

One example of where think tanks have had a decisive impact in reshaping conventional wisdom and setting a new course on a key strategic issue is the debate over NATO enlargement in the early 1990s.

U.S. think tanks played a key role in developing and building support for the US decision to enlarge NATO as part of a broader strategy of overcoming the continent’s Cold War divide and building a Europe whole and free and at peace.⁸

RAND, in particular, was adamant about remaining analytical and objective. They were able to provide busy and overworked senior policy-makers what they often needed most—a framework and a way of thinking through a problem as well as a set of options

complete with pros and cons. In this case, it was not the op-eds or other advocacy pieces individuals wrote that made a difference. Rather, according to Asmus, “it was a series of analytical briefings that explored alternative rationales for enlarging the Alliance, the practical issues of how it could be done, the costs thereof, and the implication for Russia and other countries not invited.”⁹

As an institution, RAND never took an official stance pro or con on NATO enlargement. It saw its role first and foremost as assisting policy-makers in understanding the issues, options, and tradeoffs—and letting them make better-informed decision of their own.¹⁰

As a result, a number of think tanks became, for a period of time, an informal but nonetheless real part of an extended inter-agency process and debate within the US government on NATO’s future. Their briefings and memos became an integral part of intellectual and policy debate. Think tank analysts worked closely with, and were often invited in to brief, senior officials. They were often asked to cross the Atlantic and test-market ideas and policy options with West European allies or Central European partners in order to provide feedback before final decision in Washington were made.¹¹

“In today’s globalizing world, the pace of diplomacy is accelerating while the internal ability of governments to thin long-term and conceptually continues to decrease. This trend is further exacerbated by the long-term under-funding of the State Department.

In practical terms, this has meant that whatever resources exist on paper for longer-term strategic planning are often de facto pressed into service to simply manage the day-to-day operational workload. Often there is little, if any, time left over for other tasks.¹²

The need to manage day-to-day operational needs often crowd out efforts to devote more energy to longer-germ intellectual thinking.

Additionally, policy and planning staffs are less and less able to lay the role initially envisaged for them. This suggests that the demand from within government for creative thinking from the outside is likely to continue and may even increase. As long as governments suffer from a limited internal capacity to do long-term strategic planning, they will continue to reach out to the think tank world for research and ideas they can tap into and exploit.

For think tanks, this means not only must they have access to these decision-makers, but that the key to success is truly the quality of one's work and the ability to address the needs of senior policy-makers and the packaging of practical policy recommendations.¹³ The Council uses its "Council Mentions" tool—essentially a search tool employed by the Council library--to catch any reference or mention of the Council's experts or members in printed or broadcast material. It is a steady and daily diet of mentions that is then sent to the staff and as a link to the membership and as a post to the webpage.

Additionally, in a study of U.S. opinion leaders conducted by Erdos & Morgan, the premier business-to-business research firm, the Council's journal, *Foreign Affairs*, was ranked as the most influential media outlet in the United States. The findings place *Foreign Affairs* ahead of all other magazines and newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The Economist*, as well as all broadcast media.¹⁴

Council President Richard Haass commented,

“I am not surprised by these results. We provide a valuable forum that is innovative, independent and nonpartisan for serious thinking about U.S. foreign policy and international relations at a time when such thinking could not be more critical.”¹⁵

The Erdos & Morgan 2004-2005 survey represented the views of over 450,000 American thought leaders who shape policy and opinion in the public and private sectors. Among some of the *Foreign Affairs* articles cited for engendering such admiration among survey participants was a history of prescient themes to include George Kennan’s 1947 doctrine of containment, Nixon’s 1967 foreshadowing of the opening to China and Sam Huntington’s 1993 ‘clash of civilization’ analysis.¹⁶

Notes

¹ Abelson, Donald E. *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University, 2002.

² Ibid., Abelson, Donald, E.

³ Ibid., Abelson, Donald, E.

⁴ Steelman, Aaron. Book Review: Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes by Donald E. Abelson, (*Cato Journal*, 2002, 163.)

⁵ Rich, Andrew; Weaver, R. Kent. Think Tanks in the U.S. Media (*The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4 Fall 2000.)

⁶ Ibid., Rich, Andrew; Weaver, R. Kent.

⁷ Talbott, Strobe. The Brookings Institution: How a Think Tank Works (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 20.

⁸ Asmus, Ronald D. Having an Impact: Think Tanks and the NATO Enlargement Debate (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 29.

⁹ Ibid., Asmus, Ronald D., 30.

¹⁰ Ibid., Asmus, Ronald D., 30.

¹¹ Ibid., Asmus, Ronald D., 31.

¹² Ibid., Asmus, Ronald D., 31.

¹³ Ibid., Asmus, Ronald D., 31.

¹⁴ CFR News Release, “Foreign Affairs Ranked as Most Influential of All Media by U.S. Opinion Leaders,” Dec. 8, 2004.

Notes

¹⁵ Calendar and Chronicle, Council on Foreign Relations Newsletter, January 2005.,
2.

¹⁶ Ibid., CFR News Release.

Chapter 6

Findings and Conclusions

We must pay closer attention to how think tanks have contributed to specific foreign policy debates and whether policy-makers in different branches, departments, and agencies have heeded their advice. Only then can a more informed observation about their role and impact be made.¹

In addition to supplying experts for incoming administrations, think tanks provide departing officials with institutional settings in which they can share insights gleaned from government service, remain engaged in pressing foreign policy debates, and constitute an informal shadow foreign affairs establishment. This “revolving door” is unique to the United States, and a source of its strength.²

In addition to bringing new ideas and experts into government, think tanks provide policy-makers with venues in which to build shared understanding, if not consensus, on policy options among the foreign policy public.³

“We cannot, for instance, conclude that think tanks have influence 20 percent or 50 percent of the time. We cannot even say for certain how much impact specific think tanks have had at particular stages of policy debates or whom exactly they have influenced. At best, by assessing their involvement in specific policy areas, we can obtain a better sense of how relevant or irrelevant they were,” said Abelson.⁴

So, what does this mean for the military and the U.S. Air Force? Like the DOD civilian leadership, the uniformed military services require high-quality; objective research on geopolitical trends and the implications of different foreign policy options.⁵

From a strategic communication perspective, it is clear that think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations can be not only a potential non-partisan ally on a given problem or issue, but also a bridge to gap our own military decision makers' time crunch in researching real and viable options on complicated issues.

It may also be of value to ensure a continued number of military officers regularly participate in think tank discussions and even in pursuing membership.

Finally, think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations are ultimately valuable venues for our military leaders to educate the public about a given policy, operation or program where there will be maximum dissemination among influential members without the burden of legislative testimony or filtering by the news media.

Think tanks are now called upon to contribute to a new challenge in the emergence of terrorism as a worldwide threat and of homeland security as a national priority of the highest order. Bigger bombs, better guns, and new weapons systems alone are not enough to defeat terrorists, who operate far from traditional battlefields and often in an asymmetrical fashion.⁶

As we continue to wage the war on terrorism with critical military operations underway around the world, and the attendant operational and personnel-related policies that accompany them, the need is greater than ever to communicate not only what we are doing and how we are doing, but where we are going.

No longer can our senior leaders report only on the operational aspects of a conflict; they are obliged to report on those operations within the larger political-military context of the region, the Administration's foreign policy, the interagency process and coalition partners' concerns.

Traditional public affairs venues, such as press conferences and background interviews are only a partial solution to attending to this communication task. Think Tanks should be embraced for their ability to provide military leaders not only valuable education and options, but as important platforms for telling the military story.

Notes

¹ Abelson, Donald E. *American Think-Tanks and their Role in US Foreign Policy*. New York: St Martins, 1996

² Haass, Richard. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker's Perspective (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 7.

³ Ibid., Haass, Richard, 7.

⁴ Abelson, Donald E. *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University, 2002.

⁵ Rich, Michael D. Rand: How Think Tanks Interact with the Military (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002), 23.

⁶ Ibid., Rich, Michael D., 24.

Appendix A

Council on Foreign Relations Communications Department's List of Publication Political Leanings

<u>Publication</u>	<u>Leaning</u>
American Prospect	Left
American Scholar	Neutral
American Spectator	Conservative
Atlantic	Neutral
Brookings Review	Neutral
Business Week	Neutral
Canadian Journal of Political Science	Neutral
China Quarterly	Neutral
Commentary	Conservative
Commonwealth	Democrat
Comparative Politics	Neutral
Congressional Quarterly Weekly	Neutral
Current History	Neutral
Defense News	Neutral
Diplomatic History	Neutral
Economic Development and Cultural Change	Democrat
Economic Journal	Democrat
Economist	Neutral
Esquire	Neutral
Ethics and International Affairs	Neutral
Finance and Development	Democrat
Foreign Affairs	Neutral
Foreign Policy	Neutral

Global Governance	Democrat
Government & Opposition	Democrat
Harper's	Liberal
Harvard Business Review	Neutral
Harvard International Review	Neutral
Hill	Neutral
International Affairs	Neutral
International Finance	Neutral
International Journal	Democrat
International Legal Materials	Democrat
International Organization	Neutral
International Relations	Democrat
International Security	Neutral
International Spectator	Democrat
Issues in Science and Technology	Democrat
Journal of Democracy	Neutral
Midstream	Democrat
Nation	Liberal
National Interest	Neutral/Conservative
National Journal	Neutral
National Review	Conservative
New Leader	Democrat
New Perspectives Quarterly	Neutral
New Republic	N/L/C (regular authors are all three)
New Statesman	Democrat
NYROB	Liberal
New Yorker	Neutral/Liberal

Newsweek	Neutral
Orbis	Neutral
Policy Review	Conservative
Political Science Quarterly	Neutral
SAIS Review	Neutral
Salon.com	Liberal
Security Studies	Neutral
Slate.msn.com	Neutral/Liberal
Studies in Conflict and Terrorism	Neutral
Survival	Neutral
Third World Quarterly	Democrat
Time	Neutral
Times Literary Supplement	Neutral/Liberal
US News and World Report	Neutral
Vanity Fair	Neutral/Liberal
Washington Quarterly	Neutral
Washington Report on Middle East Affairs	Liberal but can be across spectrum
Weekly Standard	Conservative
Wilson Quarterly	Neutral
World Policy Journal	Neutral/Liberal
World Politics	Neutral
World Today	Neutral

Appendices B-D

(provided as separate JPEG attachments electronically)

Bibliography

- Abelson, Donald E. *American Think-Tanks and their Role in US Foreign Policy*. New York: St Martins, 1996
- Abelson, Donald E. *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University, 2002.
- Abelson, Donald E. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: An Historical View (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)
- Asmus, Ronald D. Having an Impact: Think Tanks and the NATO Enlargement Debate (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)
- Betancourt, Amy Coughenour. A National Dialogue on Establishing a Think Tank: The Case of Honduras (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)
- Carlin, D.B., & McKinney, M. S. (Eds.). (1994). The 1992 presidential debates in focus. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Calendar and Chronicle, Council on Foreign Relations Newsletter, October 2004.
- Calendar and Chronicle, Council on Foreign Relations Newsletter, January 2005.
- Calendar and Chronicle, Council on Foreign Relations Newsletter, February 2005.
- Deane, Claudia. Computer-Assisted Influence? (*Washington Post*, Washington D.C., April 19,2002.)
- Delgado, Richard; Stefancic, Jean; Tushnet, Mark. *No Mercy: How Conservative Think Tanks and Foundations Changed America's Social Agenda*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1996.
- Garnett, Mark; Stone, Diane. *Think Tanks of the World: Global Perspectives on Ideas, Policy and Governance*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998.
- Golden, James L., Berquist, Goodwin F. & Coleman, William E. (1996). The Rhetoric of Western Thought, 6th ed. City: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.
- Haass, Richard. Personal Interview, October 2004.
- Haass, Richard. Think Tanks and U.S. Foreign Policy: A Policy-Maker's Perspective (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)

Higgott, Richard; Stone, Diane. The Limits of Influence: Foreign Policy Think Tanks in Britain and the USA (*Review of International Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, January 1994)

Howard, John A. and Jeffrey A. Dvorkin. Media-savvy think tanks provide influence. (*Rockford Register Star*, Rockford, IL, July 18, 2004.)

Koppel, Ted (2000). *Nightline*. "Personal Communication," 4 Aug 00.

McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1993). The evolution of agenda-setting research: Twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas. *Journal of Communication*, 43(2), pp. 58-67.

McCombs, M.E., and Shaw, D.L. (1991). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. In Proress, David L. and Maxwell McCombs (Eds.), Agenda-Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking (p 17). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McGann, James G. Think Tanks and the Transnationalization of Foreign Policy (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)

Mesidor, Cleve. (2000). Agenda-Setting: The CNN Effect and its Impact on US International Policy. Paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

Mills, C. Wright. 1956 [1970] The Power Elite. New York: Oxford University Press.

Powell, Larry and Joseph Cowart. (2000). Political Rhetoric and their Speeches. Position paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

Reynolds, H.T. "The Power Elite."

Rich, Andrew; Weaver, R. Kent. Think Tanks in the U.S. Media (*The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 5, no. 4 Fall 2000.)

Rich, Michael D. Rand: How Think Tanks Interact with the Military (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)

Roman, Nancy.

Sievers, Leroy (2000). *Nightline*. "Personal Communication," 4 Aug 00.

Smith, James A. *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite*. New York: Free Press, 1993.

Solomon, Richard H. The U.S. Institute of Peace: A Hands-On Approach to Resolving Conflict (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)

Spiker, Julia. Analyzing Political Malaise: Communicating Politics through Debates and Focus Groups. Paper for the National Communication Association Summer Conference. Washington, D.C.

Steelman, Aaron. Book Review: Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes by Donald E. Abelson, (*Cato Journal*, 2002, pp 163-165)

Talbott, Strobe. The Brookings Institution: How a Think Tank Works (*U.S. Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2002)